

Public Transportation

The availability of public transportation is a key element of the 2040 CRP and is, in fact, integral to the success of the region. Currently, the people of Northwest Indiana are served by intercity and commuter rail, local bus, demand response and paratransit service. However, the current services can neither be taken for granted, nor considered sufficient to achieve the goals of the 2040 CRP. Only portions of the region are served by fixed route buses while many important centers of activity and employment, are un-served, such that an already deficient system lacks multimodal transportation connectivity. Further, while there are multiple providers of public demand response service, the overall capacity of the system is inadequate to meet the needs of the transit dependent population in the region. To make matters even worse, declining funding subsidies have resulted in service cuts that make regional transit travel an option that is even less convenient, attractive and viable for riders. Compounding these service and subsidy issues is the fact that all of the public transit service providers are hampered by the lack of a dedicated regional or countywide source of funding that provides stable annual support and can be used as a match for federal and state transit grants. Consequently, expanding services to create a truly regional system that supports Livable Centers is more challenging in Northwest Indiana than many other regions.

Throughout the 2040 planning process, participants supported the concepts of Livable Centers, urban revitalization, sustainable communities and in-fill development as the preferred scenario for future growth and development in Northwest Indiana. Linking existing communities, regional employment and activity centers, and recreational amenities was recognized as essential to achieving the 2040 vision of a vibrant, revitalized, accessible, and united region. This is reflected in the CRP goals of creating livable urban, suburban and rural centers, furthering a safe and secure transportation system, securing adequate transportation funding and efficiently using resources.

Overview of Public Transportation in Northwest Indiana

Northwest Indiana is now served by a number of public and private transit providers that offer intercity passenger rail, commuter rail, fixed route bus systems with complementary paratransit, private intercity bus and motor coach, as well as public and private demand response transit services for the elderly and disabled. While there is a level of regional cooperation among the providers, the Northwest Indiana region lacks a truly comprehensive, independently funded, regional transit agency that serves both the transit-dependent population and choice riders. In recent years, all public transit services in the region have been threatened by declining funding, which has forced many providers to make cuts in service, resulting in fewer areas of Northwest Indiana being served by transit.

To illustrate the level of service (in revenue vehicle hours) throughout the region, figures II.12 through II.14 show the service levels for operators in the region, according to the different types of transit (fixed route, demand response and commuter rail). This measure indicates the number of hours that transit vehicles are in active revenue generating service and available to riders. Since the onset of the national recession in 2008, two of the region's major commuter rail and fixed route operators (the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District and the Gary Public Transportation Corp) have made cuts in service as have most of the demand response operators.

As those operators made cuts, they had less ability to serve riders. According to the National Transit Database, combined ridership for all of the region's ten service providers topped 5.5 million unlinked passenger trips. Ridership since 2002 for these transit agencies is pro-

Commuter Rail Service Levels

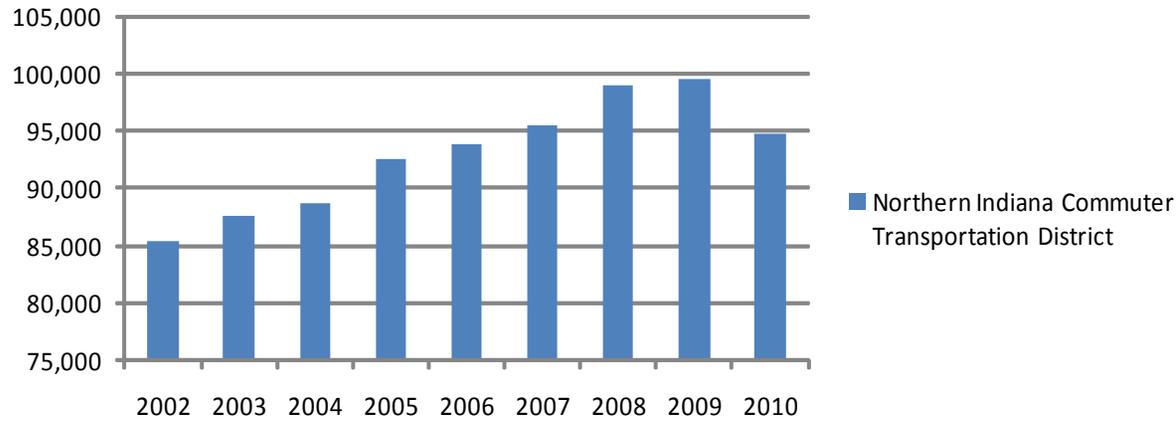


Figure II.13 Commuter Rail Service Levels. Source: National Transit Database and NIRPC, 2010. Year 2010 data is preliminary only.

Fixed Route Service Levels

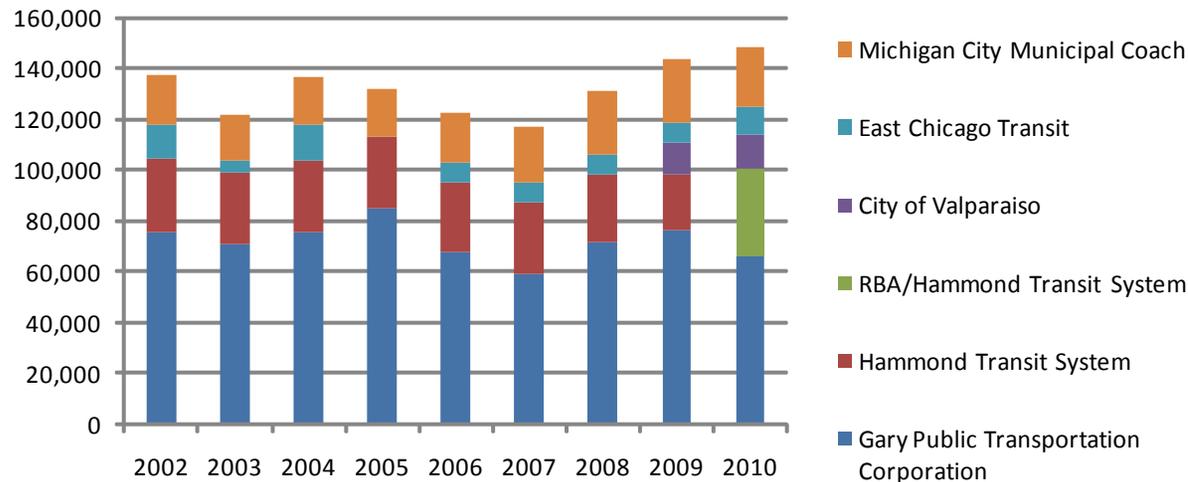


Figure II.14 Service Levels for Fixed Route Operators by Transit Operating Agency. Source: National Transit Database and NIRPC, 2010. Year 2010 data is preliminary only. It is also noted that in 2010 the Hammond Transit System became the RBA.

vided in figures II.15 through II.17, which shows that ridership has declined in recent years primarily due to service cuts by Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) and the Gary Public Transportation Corp (GPTC) and economic conditions.



Southlake Community Services Vehicle. NIRPC photo.

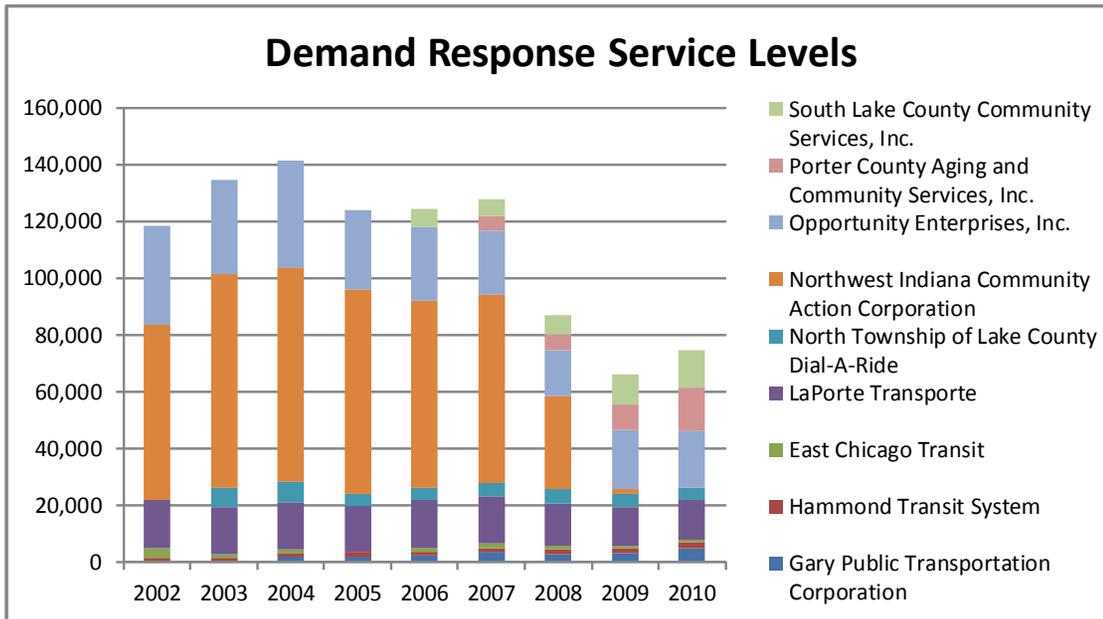


Figure II.15 Service Levels for Demand Response Operators by Transit Operating Agency. Source: National Transit Database and NIRPC, 2010. Year 2010 data is preliminary only.

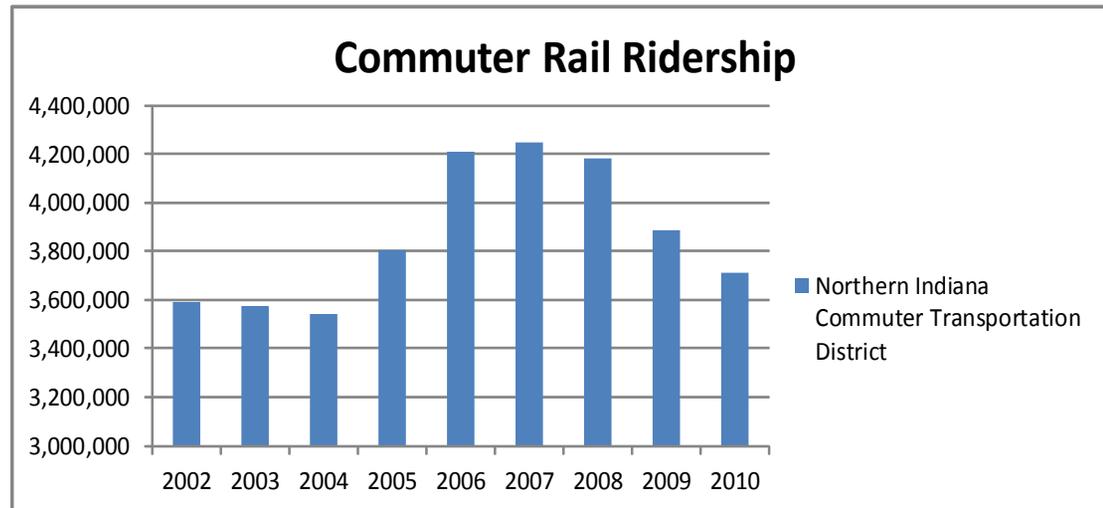


Figure II.16 Commuter Rail Ridership. Source: National Transit Database and NIRPC, 2010. Year 2010 data is preliminary only.



East Chicago bus. NIRPC photo.

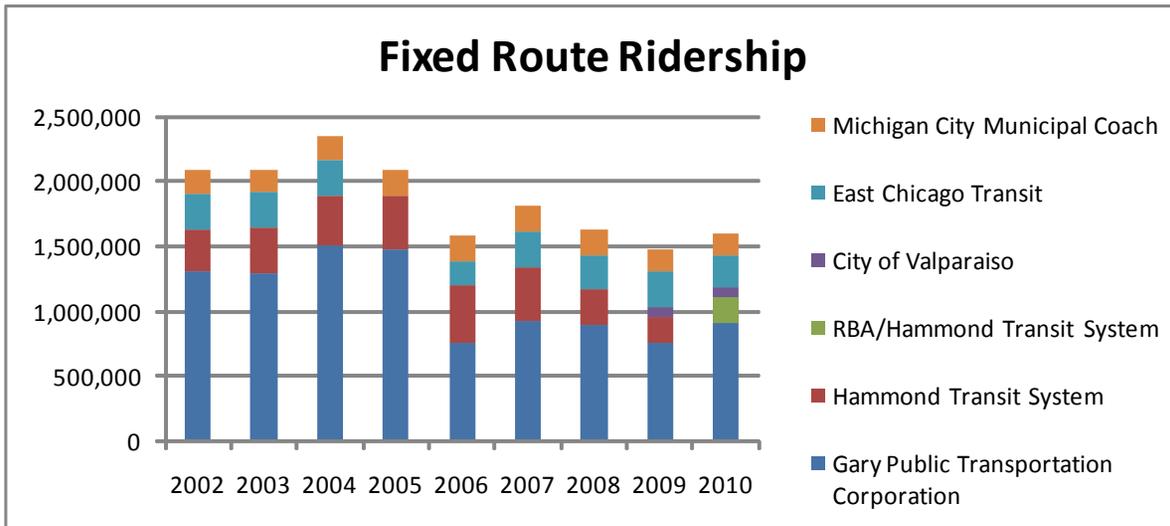


Figure II.17 Riders by Transit Operating Agency. Source: National Transit Database and NIRPC, 2010. Year 2010 data is preliminary only. It is also noted that in 2010 the Hammond Transit System became the RBA.

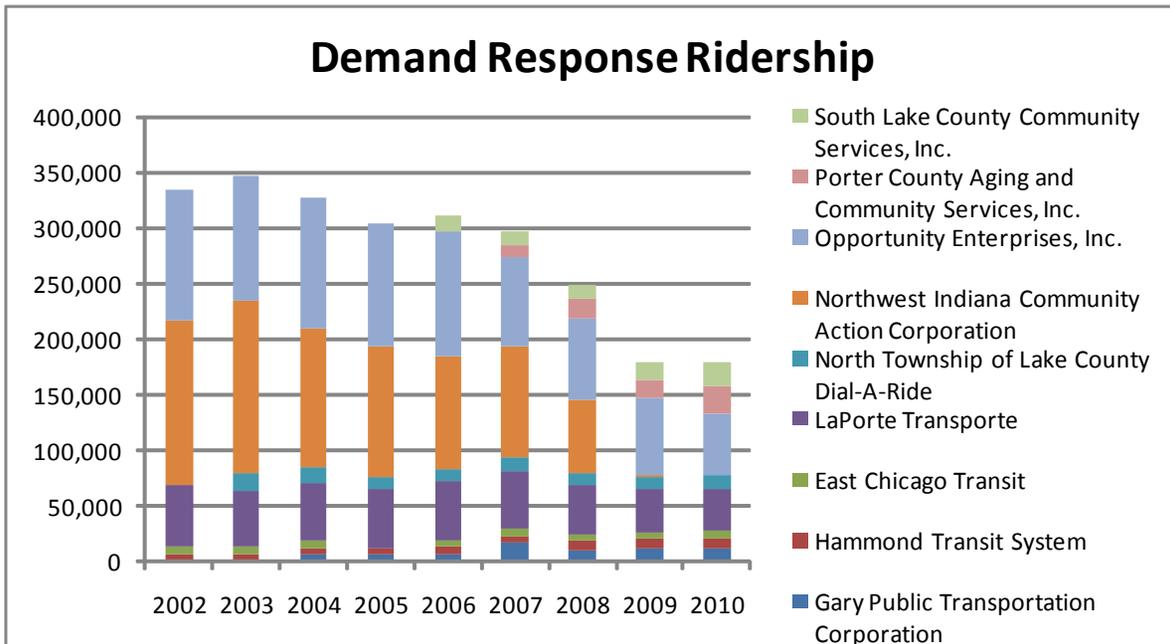
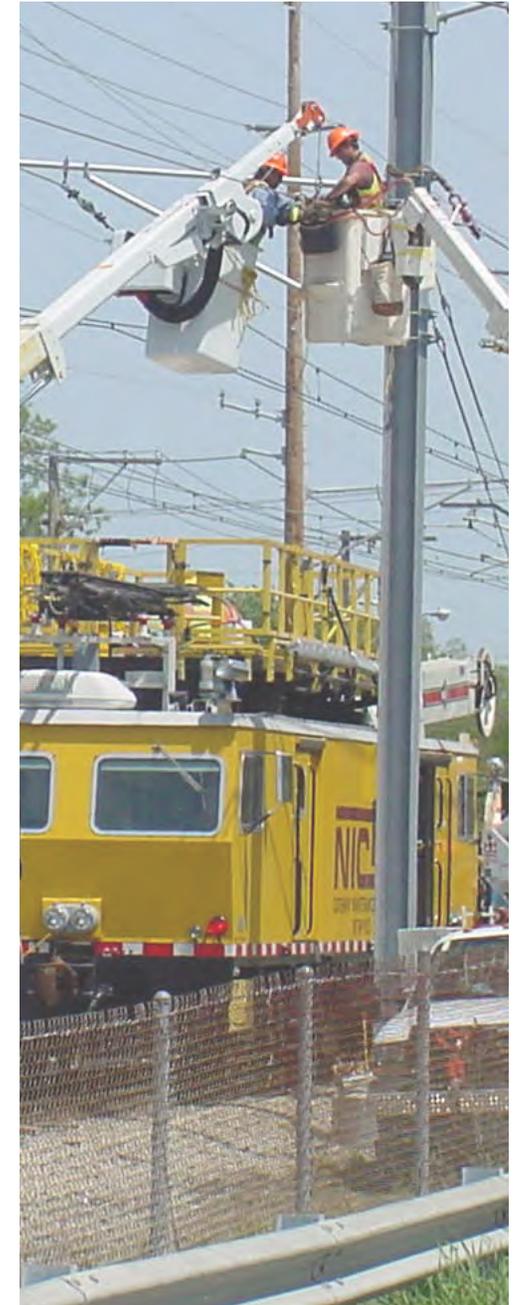


Figure II.18 Ridership for Demand Response Operators by Transit Operating Agency. Source: National Transit Database and NIRPC, 2010. Year 2010 data is preliminary only.



Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District making repairs. NIRPC photo.

Transit Operators in the Region

Intercity passenger rail service is provided by Amtrak, which operates three daily long-distance trains through the region and a regional service to Michigan with three trips per day. These services make stops in Dyer, Hammond-Whiting, and/or Michigan City. Due in part to limited service frequency, limited multimodal transportation connections and limited passenger amenities, Amtrak recorded fewer than 10,000 boardings or alightings in Northwest Indiana in 2009.

Commuter rail service is provided by the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD). NICTD serves four counties and operates between South Bend and Chicago with a total of 11 stations in Lake, Porter and LaPorte Counties. Also known as the “South Shore Line”, NICTD provides 3 million trips annually, primarily serving commuters traveling from Northwest Indiana and St. Joseph County into downtown Chicago.

Fixed-route bus service in the region is provided both at the municipal and regional level (Figure II.18). Municipally owned and operated fixed-route bus service can be found in East Chicago (East Chicago Public Transit), Gary (Gary Public Transportation Corporation), Michigan City (Michigan City Municipal Coach), and Valparaiso (V-Line). The services generally operate every hour, with some of GPTC’s routes operating every 30 minutes and others every two hours. Ridership on the fixed route systems was 1,418,185 in 2010, with an additional 17,929 complementary paratransit rides.

On the regional level, the Northwest Indiana Regional Bus Authority (RBA) operates fixed-route service in Hammond, Highland, Munster, Whiting,

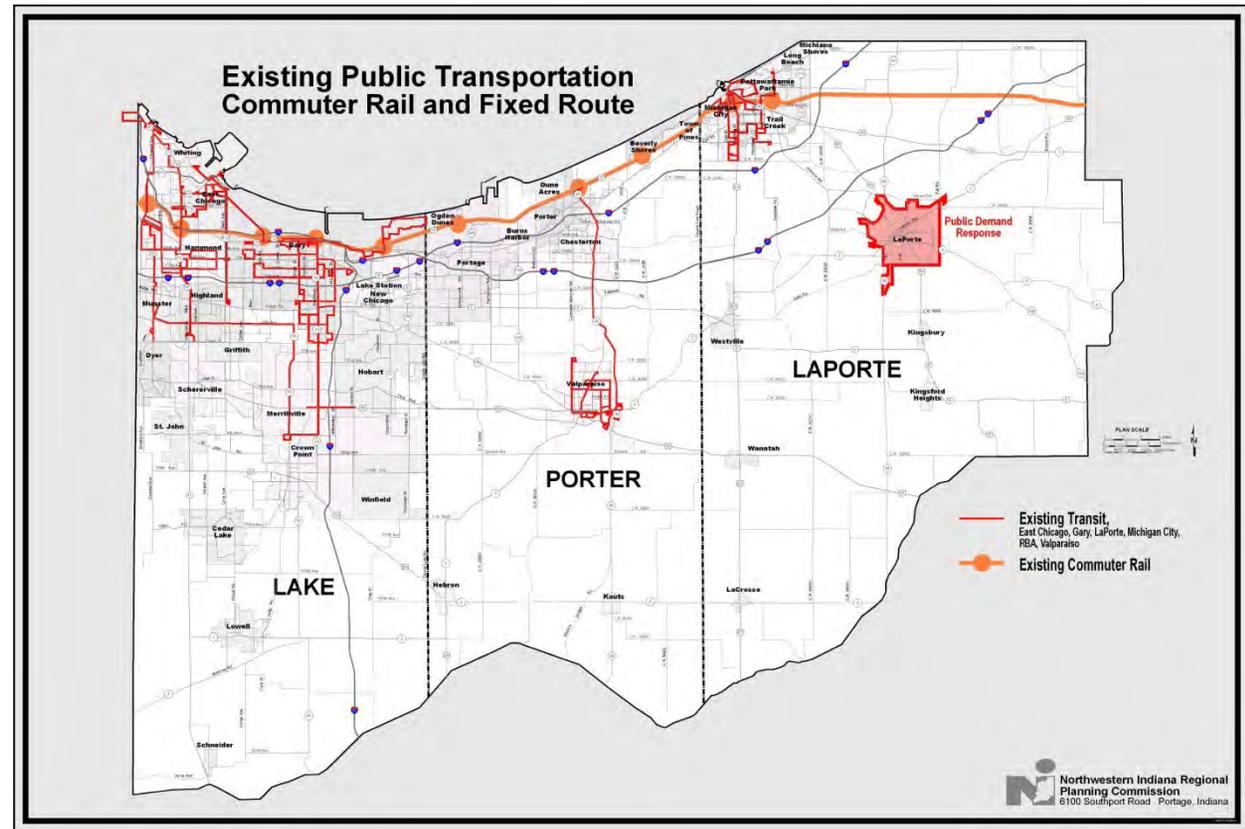


Figure II.19 Existing Public Transit – Commuter Rail and Fixed Route, NIRPC, April, 2011.

Griffith, Merrillville, and Crown Point, with connections to East Chicago, Gary, and CTA Pace Suburban Bus Service in Illinois. The RBA took over the service previously operated by the City of Hammond in 2010 and substantially expanded the service area with several bus routes providing regional connections. The RBA routes run hourly. Ridership on the regional routes was 196,604 in 2010, with an additional 9,382 complementary paratransit rides. The total combined fixed-route and complementary paratransit services provided nearly 1.6 million trips in 2010.

In addition to the required complementary paratransit service within the fixed route areas, a network consisting of human services pro-

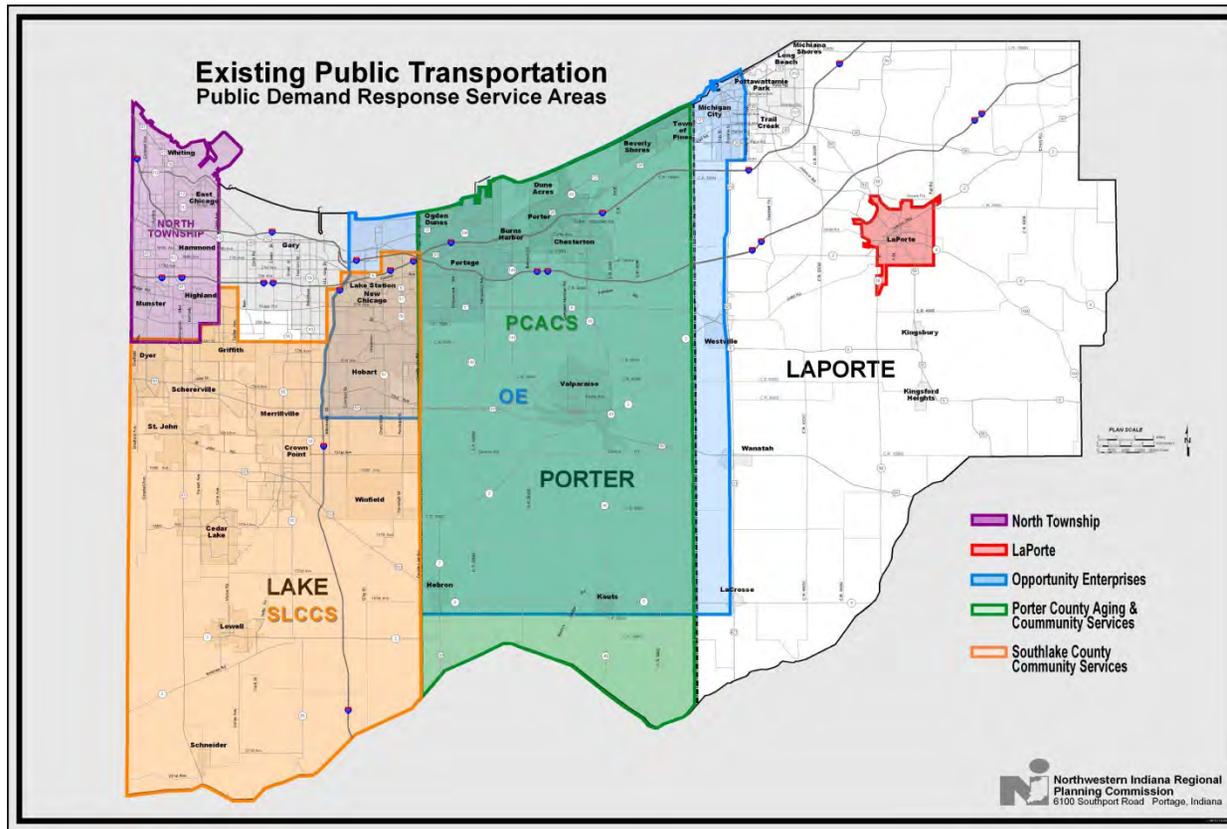


Figure II.20 Existing Public Transportation – Public Demand Response Service Areas

viders, townships, and private providers offer either public demand response (Figure II.19) or limited service for elderly and disabled. These services frequently limit trips to origins and destinations within their municipal, township or county boundaries, which makes regional connections difficult. In addition, several human services agencies provide client-based services in larger areas, but have difficulty reaching clients in the extreme south and southeast areas of the region due to prohibitive costs. In 2010, the total number of rides provided by the demand response operators in all three counties was 112,899.

Recent Planning Initiatives

Since the 1970s, NIRPC has sponsored a series of planning initiatives to identify transit needs, operating strategies and funding sources for the region. Common themes have emerged in the findings and recommendations of each of these studies, including:

- The need for regional services to connect major centers of activity, employment, shopping, medical service and recreation in the three counties,
- The need for a regional organization to coordinate, manage and operate these services, and
- The need for a regional funding source to provide stable and dedicated capital and operating supports for these services.

In 2000 Lake County took the historic step of creating the Regional Transportation Committee to begin building a regional transportation authority. Today's RBA is the result of those early efforts. The RBA's 2006 Strategic and Operations Plan called for many of the same routes and services identified in earlier planning studies. Among the observations noted in the RBA Strategic and Operations Plan is the following:

- Unmet needs for transit service exist – and it is not confined to the urbanized northern portions of the region.
- Northwest Indiana needs to provide an additional 2.3 million trips annually to serve unmet demand
- South Lake and Porter counties require five times the current number of trips
- North Lake County requires a doubling of service

Implementation of the Strategic and Operations Plan began with the city of Hammond turning over its municipal transit service to the RBA in 2010. In 2010, the RBA implemented new services covering not only Hammond but also all of North Township, including Munster and Highland. The RBA also initiated commuter bus service to Chicago from Dyer, and has plans to add another service from the Hobart-Merrillville area.

The only other significant new services are centered in Porter County. The city of Valparaiso implemented its deviated route transit service and an express service to Chicago, the first region community to start a new service in over 50 years.

An update to LaPorte County's transit needs and services planning was undertaken in 2008. The NIRPC-sponsored report looked at the feasibility of creating a consolidated human services and rural public transit system (Feasibility Study for Consolidated Human Services and Rural Public Transit in LaPorte County, Indiana, Westat, 2008). Recommendations from the study included a stepped approach to consolidation that would initially establish a shared call center and dispatch operation and provide for ride-sharing among human services providers. This would be followed by improvements to Michigan City's and LaPorte's existing transit systems and implementation of a "triangle" service covering Purdue North Central, Michigan City and LaPorte. Ultimately, the fully consolidated system would include centralized management of vehicles and drivers as well as have consolidated call center and dispatch functions. Initial steps have been taken and funding has been secured to establish the consolidated dispatch center with the city of LaPorte serving as lead agency. Other participants include the Parents and Friends, Inc./Council on Aging, and Michiana Resources, a developmental disabilities training and services center.

Issues and Challenges

Historically, there has been no shortage of attempts to craft a public transportation system for northwest Indiana that was capable of crossing municipal and county lines and meeting the needs of both the transit dependent and choice riders. The recommendation to have a regional organization to operate a regional transit system was identified in every major study conducted

over the past 33 years. While transit ridership has been declining due to reduced operating funds and cuts in service that make it difficult to adequately serve riders, there is still significant unmet need. The need for transit has been documented repeatedly and there has been little difference between recommendations except to show increasing needs based on the aging of the population and growing traffic congestion. The projected costs for a regional system, whether it be a two-county or three-county system, have of course escalated, much like the cost of living since 1978 and now that one exists, its future existence is at risk unless bold fiscal, leadership and management actions are taken to secure its future.

Expanding commuter rail to Valparaiso and/or Cedar Lake and Lowell has been the subject of feasibility and environmental impact studies for the past 10 years. While the studies have indicated that an expansion maybe feasible in terms of projected ridership, the project is stalled for lack of a dedicated source of local funding to provide the local match for federal funding for both construction and ongoing operations and maintenance. NICTD is currently engaged in a study to determine the feasibility of realigning the tracks that travel on downtown Michigan City streets. Long a dream of local officials, moving the tracks would improve public safety, spur the economic redevelopment of the downtown area, and improve the efficiency of the South Shore service.

Long-Term Funding

The lack of a dedicated local source of funding to support public transportation is the acknowledged number one problem for transit in northwest Indiana. The RBA's existing funding will be exhausted by June of 2012. If regional bus service ends, northwest Indiana could be one of the largest metropolitan areas without bus service in its urban core and with no connections among its major activity centers. If the RBA service is lost, disadvantaged communities will be disproportionately impacted. Compounding the situation is the fact that the other fixed route providers in the urban core, East Chicago Public Transit, Gary Public Transportation Corp, and Michigan City Municipal Coach, are all faced with dwindling revenues from

property taxes with no new sources of funding in sight. Service reductions already have been announced in East Chicago and Gary. Each has eliminated Saturday service and/or reduced late night service hours. GPTC has also reduced the number of routes it operates by either eliminating or consolidating services.

The lack of local funding also impacts the commuter rail service operated by NICTD. NICTD relies on a small portion of the state sales tax dedicated to commuter rail to support operations. Over the course of the recent economic downturn, NICTD's state revenues declined with the loss of state sales tax dollars, resulting in personnel reductions to reduce costs. There is no mechanism in place to finance expansion of commuter rail, and no funding in place for operations and maintenance of a new service.

If northwest Indiana is to realize the vision of a vibrant, revitalized, accessible and united region, a dedicated source of long-term local funding must be created to support the types of services that will help achieve it.

Regional Leadership

To achieve the regional vision and ensure the viability and longevity of a regional transit system, strong leadership and coalition building is necessary. The dialogue on the need for regional transit and a local dedicated funding source needs to be elevated beyond local politics and parochial interests and communicated to the state with one cohesive voice so that the needs of the entire region are met.

Regional Oversight and Management

Northwest Indiana must have a regional transit service delivery mechanism. Maintaining multiple local operators has resulted in services responding to only localized needs at the expense of broader regional mobility needs. The success of regional public transit is dependent upon the participation of the entire region – and not serving portions of the region unnecessarily hinders regional mobility at the

expense of employers, businesses, job seekers and others. An organization with members who have credibility, expertise and authority to make decisions is critical to meeting the challenges of funding and providing the regional transportation that will assure northwest Indiana's future success.

Outreach and Education

There is an equally critical need to increase the public's and local officials' knowledge of the benefits of public transit. The positive economic and environmental impacts of a robust transit system have been demonstrated repeatedly all over the country. A robust system serving our region can contribute to job creation, stimulate development and redevelopment, and improve worker and business productivity. There is a lack of understanding among the public of the tremendous impact transit can have on the quality of life in our region. Raising the level of knowledge and comprehension of the benefits of public transportation is the first step in developing the political will to fund it.

Partnering with other regional groups in Indiana who are pursuing transit initiatives is another type of outreach that would increase the effectiveness of our own advocacy efforts. Interacting with the Central Indiana Regional Transportation Authority (CIRTA), the IndyConnect initiative and the citizen-advocacy group INCAT (Indiana Citizens Aligned for Transit) would present a more solid front when approaching the state for legislative support for funding initiatives or creating appropriate regional structures. Building relationships on the local level with groups such as Clean Cities, AARP, Urban League, and the Hoosier Environmental Council would also help support public education.

Regional Benefits of Public Transportation

Achieving the 2040 vision of a vibrant, revitalized, accessible, and united region will only happen with a truly regional public mass transit system. Not only does transit provide consumers with transportation alternatives to balance growing fuel costs, it also fosters transit-oriented development (TOD), which can spur economic revitalization at the neighborhood level

and foster regional economic development. In this context, transit can support the Livable Centers concept as it helps to contain sprawl and the concentration of people around transit centers is symbiotically related to the population concentrations desired by developers and businesses seeking customers.

For the population that does not drive, a regional transit system is a necessity to share in the high quality of life personal mobility affords us. With a transit system that connects the Livable Centers of the region, the region's residents are more connected and have more options for employment, services and recreation.

Mass transit is also a proven strategy in reducing traffic congestion, which can save employers and employees millions of dollars in lost productivity. Fewer cars and less time spent idling in traffic also improves air quality. As a region that has struggled to meet the US EPA clean air standards, northwest Indiana stands to benefit directly from the cleaner air reduced congestion can bring to an area.

Emerging Opportunities for Intercity Passenger Rail

The increasing interest in national intercity passenger rail investment creates unique opportunities for Northwest Indiana. As a convergence point on the national railroad network, the region is crossed by several of the high speed rail corridors included in the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI).

Some of these corridors are currently served by Amtrak and are proposed for more frequent, faster and more reliable service. Other corridors are proposed for development of new passenger service. In either case, intercity passenger rail investments can create opportunities for integration with existing and planned transit services. For example, by allowing regional commuter rail projects to share track, signal, and station costs with the national projects, NICTD's West Lake Corridor concepts to Lowell and Valparaiso could be advanced at lower local cost.

Although the specific alignments, station locations, and operating plans of improved intercity passenger rail services remain the subject of further study, some key opportunities include:

- Intercity passenger rail improvements for the Chicago-to-Detroit and Chicago-to-Cleveland corridors of the MWRRI. If these are implemented in the Norfolk-Southern corridor currently used by Amtrak for its Michigan and Ohio services, the Gary-Chicago International Airport (GYY) could emerge as a major regional multimodal transit hub. This facility, at the nexus of high speed rail, NICTD, bus services and the lakefront trail, could attract new airline service to GYY, link important regional and national transportation services, and help to organize and stimulate the redevelopment of part of Gary.
- Replacement of the current Amtrak alignment through South Bend with the southern route to Ohio via Fort Wayne. If this is selected, the West Lake Corridor to Valparaiso could be advanced as a regional commuter rail service operating with additional stops in the same corridor.
- Amtrak passenger rail service improvements to Indianapolis through Dyer. If this corridor is selected for improvements, the West Lake Corridor to Lowell could again be advanced as a regional commuter rail service operating with additional stops in the same corridor.
- Six of the regional bus routes proposed in the RBA Strategic Plan (shown with minor adjustments to serve Livable Centers) provide opportunities for eventual development of arterial bus rapid transit in some of the major corridors in the region. They also provide the backbone of a network of services connecting rail stations and other activity centers.

These concepts have not had the benefit of objective quantitative studies on travel patterns, road or rail right-of-way availability, traffic conflicts, capital or operating cost estimates, or field verification. More extensive feasibility studies and alternatives analysis should be performed to refine the alignment, operating concepts, and other features of each element of the system. Accordingly, NIRPC should develop a regional long-term public transportation framework plan,

including an assessment of market opportunities, intercity rail integration opportunities, funding options and potential implementation priorities based on a range of potential funding strategies.

Recommendations: A Regional Transit Framework

A regional Transit Framework has been prepared, providing a vision of how a transit investment program could support the Livable Centers strategy that is key to realizing the NIRPC 2040 CRP (Figure II.20). The vision synthesizes information from several recent planning efforts (including the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative, INDOT Rail Plan, NICTD West Lake Corridor Study, RBA Strategic Plan, and Marquette Plan), the locations of the Livable Centers identified in the CRP, the alignments of existing and proposed transit services, multimodal connection opportunities, and the major corridors and focal points identified in CRP workshops.

Key concepts of the Transit Framework include:

- A focus on high capacity transit services that have the ability to support desirable development patterns- including high speed rail, commuter rail and regional bus service. Supportive fixed route, demand response, and other local transit services are to be provided. While some examples are shown, the specific characteristics of these supporting services are considered to be a subject for future study.
- The vision draws extensively on projects that have already received some level of planning scrutiny. It assumes that the South of the Lake high speed rail improvements are completed in the Norfolk-Southern corridor currently used by Amtrak for its Michi-

gan and Ohio services, that both legs of the West Lake corridor are implemented to extend NICTD commuter rail service to Lowell and Valparaiso, and that the local and regional bus services in the RBA Strategic Plan are fully implemented.

- The Gary/Chicago International Airport is identified as an opportunity for a major regional multi-modal transit hub. This facility, at the nexus of high-speed rail, NICTD, and bus services, as well as a connection with the lakefront trail, could attract new airline service to the airport as part of Chicago's airport system, link important regional and national transportation services, and help to organize and stimulate the redevelopment of part of Gary.
- The implementation of high speed rail also appears to provide some good opportunities to advance the West Lake Corridor concept, in

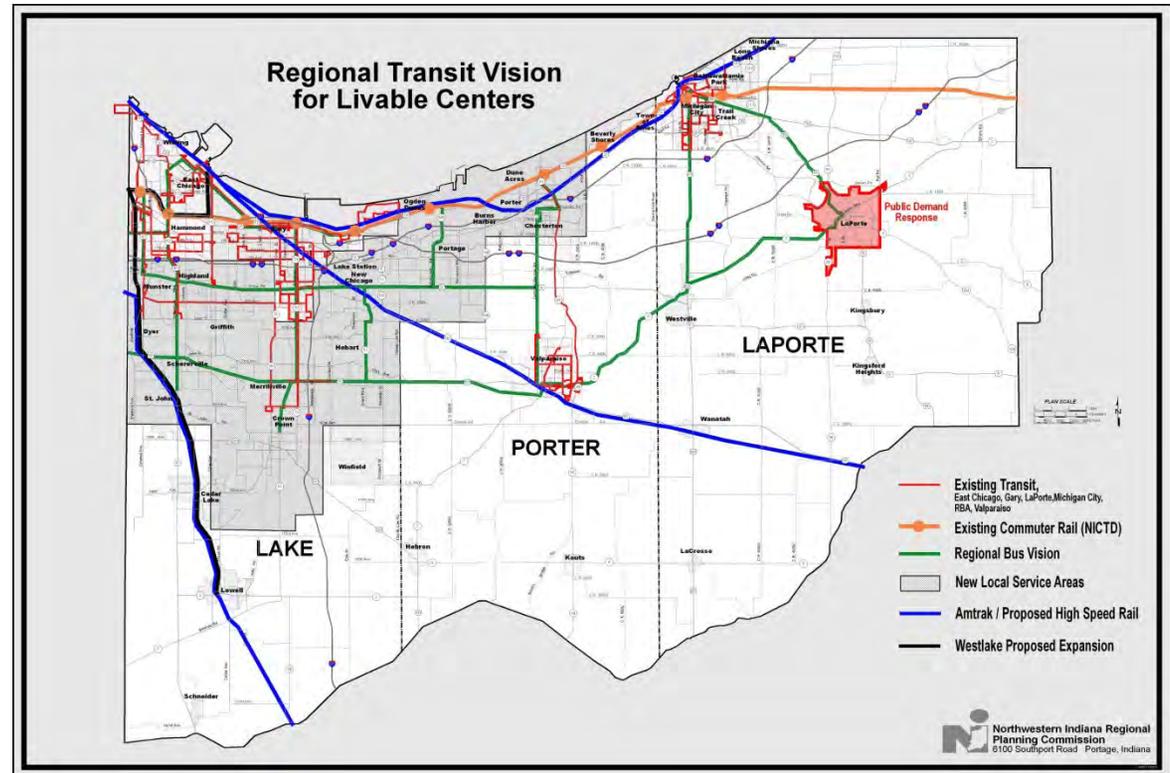


Figure II.21 Regional Transit Vision for Livable Centers, NIRPC, April 2011.

particular if the southern route via Fort Wayne is selected to replace the current Amtrak alignment through South Bend.

- Six of the regional bus routes proposed in the RBA Strategic Plan (shown with minor adjustments) provide opportunities for eventual development of arterial bus rapid transit (BRT) in some of the major corridors in the region. They also provide the backbone of a network of services connecting rail stations and other activity centers. A seventh route has been proposed as a circumferential route between Ogden Dunes and Merrillville via Portage and Hobart.
- The vision provides high quality transit services to, or near, each of the metro, large, and medium centers identified in the planning process. Over the long term it will be worthwhile to study whether La Porte could be added to the system, if the level of demand for a high intensity service type between LaPorte and Michigan City and/or Valparaiso increases over time.
- New local bus services in areas where the population density would support it will be critical to connecting the livable centers with each other and the regional employment, shopping and services centers. Likely areas of such service include Schererville, Dyer and St. John; 45th Avenue corridor on the west side of Lake County; Hobart, Lake Station and New Chicago; Portage and South Haven; Chesterton, Burns Harbor and Porter; and a service corridor that encompasses Michigan City, LaPorte and Westville.
- Expanded capacity for public demand response paratransit in areas not served by fixed-route bus is a critical component of the regional system. Added capacity and increased coverage is especially important in all of LaPorte and Porter Counties, and south Lake County.

The Transit Framework will require additional study and refinement, including objective quantitative information on travel patterns, road and rail right-of-way availability, traffic conflicts, and capital and operating cost estimates. More extensive feasibility studies and alternatives analysis should be performed to refine the alignment, operating concepts, and other features that this vision may suggest for each element of the system. To support the Transit Framework and transit in Northwest Indiana in general, the 2040 CRP offers policies including:

- Support and promote the creation of a local source of funding to be dedicated to public mass transit
- Support and promote a consolidated structure for the efficient and effective provision of public mass transit
- Support and promote transit-friendly land use practices
- Support and promote public transit services that connect the region with jobs, neighborhoods, shopping, medical, entertainment, recreational and educational facilities
- Support and promote increased capacity of public demand response services where fixed route is not feasible and/or available.
- Support and promote increased accessibility for the elderly and disability communities.



South Shore train in Michigan City. Photo by Stephen Sostaric.